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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000388

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1C. DAMASCUS 341

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1
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11. (C) Summary: President Asad departed June 1 on a three-day official trip to UAE and Kuwait more confident about his internal standing and upbeat after a productive round of negotiations with the Israelis in Istanbul that may have included lower-level, face-to-face meetings. Asad also received an unexpected May 29 phone call from French President Sarkozy, who reportedly acknowledged Syria's positive role in reaching the Doha accord and reiterated a long-standing invitation to attend the July 13 heads of state meeting of the Mediterranean Political Union in Paris. Still searching for a formula to defrost relations with Saudi Arabia and generate an opening with the U.S., Bashar consulted with Qatari Emir Sheik Hamad bin-Halifa al-Thani over the weekend, made noises about visiting Beirut and establishing diplomatic relations with Lebanon, and endorsed the idea of starting a Israeli-Lebanese peace discussion. To calm Iranian anxieties since the May 21 announcement of a Golan track, Damascus publicly rejected suggestions that Syria would diminish its ties with Iran, inked a new Syrian-Iranian memorandum of defense cooperation, and allowed Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to visit Iranian FM Mottaki (in Iran.) While Bashar has no intention of breaking relations with Tehran, many here argue that a Syria-Israeli peace deal would fundamentally change this relationship. They also depict a Syrian regime that is becoming disenchanted by Iran's efforts to discredit the Turkish-brokered talks on the Golan. These upbeat comments often (and conveniently) overlook the regime's strategic interest in maintaining security ties to Iran and Hizballah. End Summary.

Bashar's Confidence Growing, Goes on the Road

12. (C) Asad departed Damascus June 1 for an overnight stop in the UAE and then onto Kuwait. The public agenda for both visits is to follow up the Arab League Summit. Privately, according to press contacts, Bashar will be urging the Kuwaitis and Emirates to use their influence with fellow GCC member Saudi Arabia to find a way to ease bilateral tensions

between Riyadh and Damascus. Both stops are expected to play up Syria's role in helping to broker a deal in Doha that brought at least a temporary pause to Lebanon's political crisis. Preceding his departure, Bashar addressed the Council of Ministers May 29 (on the occasion of the official opening of the new Prime Ministry building) and highlighted the need to continue with domestic and economic reforms. Embassy business contacts told us Bashar's order that ministers submit a financial disclosure statement represented a move against government corruption.

¶3. (C) Bashar's trip also comes on the heels of a recent round of preliminary and indirect discussions with Israel, conducted in Istanbul, and a May 21 deal on Lebanon's political crisis in Doha. According to MFA Advisor Samir al-Taki, he (but not Riad Daoudi, the head of the Syrian delegation) had face-to-face meetings with Israeli officials.

Though Israel, Syria, and Turkey have agreed not to announce this fact, they nonetheless have all reported rapid progress in agreeing to core principles and main agenda items for future discussions. Details on more controversial subjects (such as establishing a Golan "peace park," allowing access to Israelis and Syrians) will give negotiators plenty of substantive issues on which to focus.

¶4. (C) According to several contacts, the SARG is closely watching the ongoing investigation of PM Olmert's alleged receipt of illicit funding. Al-Taqi suggested that most Syrian officials do not believe the Golan discussions will end if PM Olmert steps down. Both FM Livni and MOD Barak would be likely to pursue peace discussions with Syria,

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al-Taqi predicted. Even if Likud were to take over the government, there would be a large incentive for Israel to pursue the talks, he said. The SARG remained confident but not overly so that talks would continue, commented Al Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi. At the very least, the Turkish government would likely press this subject with whatever new government took office. This created the sense that Syria's opening to Israel would continue to have positive effects for Damascus in the coming months, he said.

Consultations With the Qataris, A Call From Sarkozy

¶5. (C) Adding to Bashar's sense of growing strength is the continuing close cooperation he enjoys with Qataris. Emir Sheikh Hamad bin-Khalifa visited Damascus in mid-May to consult Bashar on the crisis in Lebanon. Early last week, Qatari PM/FM Hamad bin-Jasim (HBJ) (along with Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa) visited Damascus May 25 to recognize Syria's contributions to reaching a deal in Doha and to coordinate on follow-up steps in Lebanon. HBJ also pledged to use Qatar's improving relationship with Saudi Arabia to find ways of improving Saudi-Syrian relations.

¶6. (C) A May 29 phone call from French President Sarkozy to Bashar signaled Paris' interest in engaging, according to Embassy contacts. French Embassy sources here told us that Sarkozy formally invited Bashar to attend the July 13 heads of state meeting of the Mediterranean Political Union in Paris and "acknowledged Syria's positive role" in brokering the Doha accord. (Note: The Syrian press portrayed Sarkozy's remarks regarding Syria's contribution to the Doha accord in a far more flattering light.) French Embassy sources disavowed press reports that Sarkozy had expressed interest in visiting Syria, perhaps on the heels of an upcoming June 7 trip to Beirut.

¶7. (C) On May 30, Sheikh Hamad returned to Damascus for a visit organized at the last minute, according to al-Taqi. Sheikh Hamad's central message was that Syria needed to demonstrate an active commitment to pursuing diplomatic relations with Lebanon. Sheikh Hamad also reported on

Qatar's lack of progress in brokering an opening with the Saudis. According to al-Taqi, Sheikh Hamad argued that continued progress in Lebanon would reduce strained Saudi-Syrian relations. After meetings with the Qatari Emir, Bashar gave an unscheduled TV appearance in which he announced that a Lebanese-Israeli peace track would be a welcome addition to ongoing peace discussions on the Golan and Palestine tracks. Having assured the Qatari leader of Syria's willingness to establish diplomatic relations, Bashar and other SARG officials also hinted in off-the-record remarks that Bashar would be willing to travel to Beirut and/or receive Lebanese President Sleiman in Damascus, according to al-Taqi and press contacts.

Bending Backwards to Reassure Tehran

¶8. (C) Against the backdrop of positive news generated by the May 21 announcement of Turkish-brokered Syrian-Israeli talks on the Golan and the Lebanon agreement in Doha, Damascus has sought to calm Iranian worries about the future of their relations. Most of these contacts and statements were done without much planning and came in response to a flurry of Iranian requests for signs of support.

-- On May 23, Syrian Speaker of Parliament Mahmoud Abrash received Iranian parliamentarians in Damascus and issued a statement expressing appreciation for "Iranian support to Syria's firm national and nationalist stances, including the restoration of the Golan and the occupied Arab territories."

-- On May 24, Hamas Politburo leader Khaled Meshal flew to Tehran for a highly publicized May 25 meeting with Iranian FM Mottaki and said in a joint press conference afterward "there

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is great skepticism concerning Israel's seriousness to return the Golan. It's maneuvering and playing all the tracks, this is a well known game and besides, Olmert's weakness will not allow him to take this step."

-- At the same press conference, Mottaki stated "The Zionist regime must withdraw from the Golan, and we support Syrian efforts to repossess the Heights."

-- On May 25, Syrian Minister of Defense Hasan al-Turkmani arrived in Tehran for discussions with his counterpart and President Ahmmedinejad on defense cooperation. On May 26, Iranian Minister of Defense Mustafa Mohamad Najjar praised Iranian-Syrian relations and said their "ties are strategic ties founded on the national interests of the two countries and the world of Islam. Turkmani said at the same press conference that their ties "neutralize and weaken threats against the line of resistance."

-- President Ahmmedinejad, after his May 26 meeting with MOD Turkmani, congratulated Syria for its role in ending Lebanon's political crisis and said "I am sure that the Syrian leadership will cleverly handle the situation and will not leave the front line until the complete elimination of the Zionist regime's threat."

-- On May 27, in a meeting with a group of British MPs in Damascus, President Asad reaffirmed Syria's desire for peace with Israel. At the same time, he reportedly said Syria had normal relations with Iran and that any suggestion to drop them "was not a reasonable request."

-- The same day, Iranian and Syrian Ministers of Defense initialed a new memorandum on defense cooperation which emphasized the territorial integrity of the two countries, boosted technical cooperation, called for more exchanges of military delegations, and stressed the need for stronger Syrian-Iranian cooperation "at a time when the occupation and

foreign forces are the main cause of instability in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, and the Gulf Waters." Hizballah's al-Manar dedicated significant coverage to the event. Regarding Syrian talks with Israel, Syrian MOD Turkmani said Israeli FM Livni "can say whatever she wants. However, we do what we deem appropriate for us and what achieves our interests in accordance with our own strategy."

But Bashar Fed Up with "Iran's Neediness"

¶9. (C) Behind the scenes, Embassy contacts portray a hectic scene of back-and-forth demands by frantic Iranian interlocutors seemingly desperate to counter public suggestions that Syria's indirect talks with Israel would come at the expense of Iranian-Syrian relations. According to al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi, Syrian FM Muallim began fielding phone calls from FM Mottaki and other Iranian officials immediately following the May 21 announcement of discussion on the Golan. "The Iranians were in full panic mode. They wanted Bashar to come, Muallim to come, Meshal to come, anyone who might be available," claimed Hamidi. Muallim arranged to see Mottaki in Beirut at the May 25 swearing-in of new Lebanese President Sleiman. In the meantime, the SARG assented to Hamas leader Meshal's travel to Tehran for a public meeting with Mottaki. The Syrian MOD was directed to travel to Tehran over the weekend.

¶10. (C) MFA Advisor Samir al-Taqi, who had gone to Tehran May 23 as well, told us Iranians with whom he had met were "crazed" by the idea of a peace deal between Syria and Israel and demanded guarantees that the deal would not harm Syria's support of Hizballah. Al-Taqi assessed Ahmedinejad's internal political position as weakening, which added to Tehran's sense of panic. Al-Taqi suggested that his meetings with Iranian parliamentarians revealed a deep sense of discontent with the Iranian regime and belief that Iran should seek more accommodation with the West on the issue of its nuclear program. He described Iranian contacts as

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"depressed" by the Doha agreement, primarily because the prevailing view from Tehran focused on unified Arab action to contain Hizballah's military threat and to force the Lebanese opposition to reach an agreement that would constrain the resistance movement.

¶11. (C) Both al-Taqi and Hamidi agreed that the SARG had sought to reassure the Iranian regime that bilateral relations would continue. Al-Taqi stipulated, however, FM Muallem had demanded and received assurances from Mottaki that Iranian officials would refrain from condemning Syria's indirect talks with Israel. Moreover, al-Taqi added, Bashar and other SARG officials were becoming increasingly fed up the high level of "Iran's neediness."

¶12. (C) Comment: While basking in the positive reactions generated by the May 21 Doha agreement, public acknowledgment by Syria, Israel, and Turkey of a Golan track, and the election of a Lebanese President and appointment of a PM, the SARG remains seized with the unrealized goal of improving relations with the Saudis and lessening its international isolation. Since the Arab League Summit, Bashar has avoided confrontational rhetoric and has sought to appear more moderate, and he will use his foreign trips, including to the UAE, Kuwait, and India, to demonstrate that he is able to travel beyond Iran and Turkey. Al-Taqi's extremely optimistic portrayal of strains in Iranian-Syrian relations completely avoids the important SARG security interests that gird Syria's relations with Iran and Hizballah.

CORBIN